

SHARK IN THE S

From the start of the War in the desert in June 1940 the front line had swayed to-and-fro, but late May 1942 saw the 8th Army behind the defences of the Gazala-Bir Hacheim Line. Supporting them was the Western Desert Air Force (WDAF) that included eight squadrons that flew or were re-equipping with the American-built P-40 Kittyhawk. These formed two Wings. Wg Cdr Barney Beresford led 233 Wing that comprised the Kittyhawk-equipped 260 Sqn RAF and 2, 4 and 5 Sqns of the South African Air Force. No 2 and 4 were in the throes of re-equipment from the earlier Tomahawk that 5 Sqn,

under the redoubtable Maj Johnnie Frost, would fly through the rest of the year. At Gambut was Wg Cdr Clive Mayers' Kittyhawk-equipped 239 Wing that controlled 112 and 250 Sqns alongside 3 and 450 Sqns RAAF. These Squadrons were all desert veterans and commanded by experienced officers. Typical was 260 Sqn, led by Sqn Ldr 'Pedro' Hanbury, a pilot with eight victories described by one of his pilots as: "... probably one of the best all round fighter leaders in the desert. In the air, he was the 'steely grey' type, intent on destroying the enemy, and he expected the same from all his pilots. He commanded respect from everyone on the squadron." The other COs were

K'S TEETH

SAND

THE PART PLAYED BY BRITISH, AUSTRALIAN AND SOUTH AFRICAN KITTYHAWKS IN THE BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN IS DESCRIBED **BY ANDREW THOMAS**

Maj Andrew Bosman in 2 SAAF and 4 SAAF - Maj D D 'Snowy' Moodie. Whilst 239 Wings's COs were Sqn Ldr Billy Drake in 112 Sqn, Sqn Ldr Mike Judd led 250 Sqn with 3 RAAF being under Sqn Ldr Bobby Gibbes and Sqn Ldr Alan Fergusson leading 450 Sqn. They were a formidable group!

RETREAT FROM GAZALA

The Kittyhawk was being switched to fighter-bomber work, and on 16 May, 112 Sqn had been declared operational as the DAF's first 'Kittybomber' squadron. On the 26th, Rommel's *Afrika Korps* began its assault on the Allies' Gazala-Bir Hachem line leading

to six weeks of heavy fighting - and a rapid retreat for the Commonwealth forces. The fighting was no less intense in the air, though a day earlier Bobby Gibbes had been hit by fire from a Ju 88 and forced to bale-out, breaking his leg. Flt Lt Nicky Barr - a rising star - temporarily took over, just six months after joining 3 RAAF, and still a Plt Off! At 09.30 on the 27th a dozen Tomahawks of 5 Sqn SAAF, led by Johnny Frost in AK195/GL-W, scrambled for Bir Hacheim. There, at 14,500 feet, a bomber formation was seen and Frost's report being typical of many at this time: "I fired one burst from astern at close range on the last bomber, its starboard

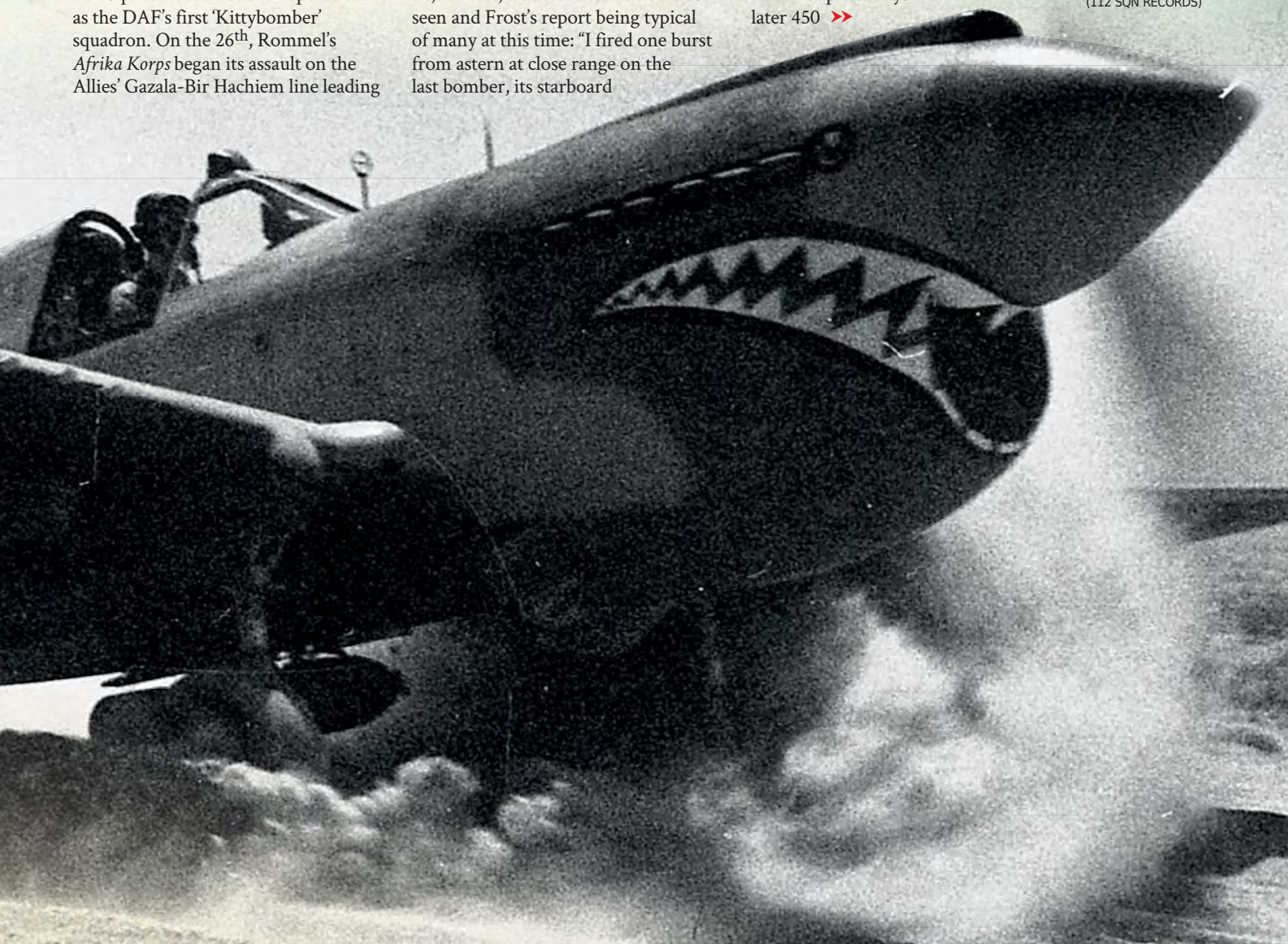
engine caught fire and large pieces flew off. It rolled over and was seen to crash." Frost's Tomahawk was then hit by cannon fire which damaged the port elevator and wingtip. It was Frost's 9th victory whilst flying AK448/GL-H. Capt John Hewitson shot down a Me 109 for his third success. Earlier, 2 Sqn SAAF had been in a fight, and Maj Johnny Human in 'DB-G', who had just assumed command, claimed his first victory when he shot down a 109 near Gazala. The fighting intensified, and a couple of days later 450 >>

OVERLEAF

One of the most successful pilots on the Kittyhawk was Sgt 'Eddie' Edwards, 260 Sqn, who flew in the Alamein period. (J F EDWARDS)

BELOW

Wearing fearsome sharks teeth markings, a 112 Sqn Kittyhawk armed with a bomb raises dust on a desert strip. (112 SQN RECORDS)



RIGHT
 Sqn Ldr Mike Judd sits in the cockpit of Kittyhawk I AK919/LD-B of 250 (Sudan) Sqn, that he led from April to November 1942. Around the exhausts is an attractive red arrow decoration. (D H CLARKE)



BELOW RIGHT
 Kittyhawk I ET861/HS-V of 260 Sqn was flown by Plt Off Ron Cundy, an RAAF pilot who claimed his first victory on 4 August 1942. (S M COATES)

BELOW LEFT
 In the fighting during the retreat to Alamein 4 Sqn SAAF continued to fly the Tomahawk IIb, such as AK428/KJ-K flown by Lt J D Robertson. On 13 June he shared in the destruction of a Bf 109. (K SMY)

Sqn attacked Ju 87s of II/StG 3 over Acroma, shooting down two - one of which was shared by Sgt Don McBurnie. He also brought down the Me 109 flown by Ltn von Fritsch. Other 109s then intervened, bringing down three Kittyhawks, including Sgt Ray Shaw who was killed in AK998/OK-O.

The following evening, 2 Sqn SAAF were in action when covering an attack against a vehicle concentration west of Knightsbridge, spotting some Stukas and Me 109 escort. Johnny Human was leading his Squadron: "I looked round and saw a 109F attacking from above at a quarter stern. I started a medium turn to the right which converted into a steep climbing turn as he got within range. As soon as he passed underneath

me I whipped round to the left and got in a good burst as he tried to turn right toward me. I saw him flick onto his back, before I turned to look behind me. When I turned around again I saw a flash of flame as it hit the ground."

Heavy sandstorms did little to blunt the pace of the intense air operations and much of the fighting took place at low level. On 31 May Frost left 5 Sqn SAAF and was replaced by the excellent Andrew Duncan, whilst John Hewitson was promoted to take over 4 Sqn SAAF. However, that evening, Duncan was shot down by Oblt Otto Schulz of II/JG 27 and so Frost returned and was soon back in action - as were other Kittyhawk squadrons that were attacking the advancing enemy and engaging German and

Italian aircraft. Successes and losses quickly mounted. At lunchtime on 3 June, 5 Sqn SAAF claimed eight Ju 87s and a Me 109 but then suffered the loss of five aircraft to the escort. One of 260 Sqn's pilots, Sgt Eddie Edwards, succinctly wrote of that period: "June 1942 was another difficult period for everyone when the Germans were preparing for their advance, and 260 Squadron was primarily assigned to bomber escort duties over enemy concentrations. The enemy lines were only 25-30 minutes flying time from the Gambut airfields."

The Kittyhawks of 239 Wing were now concentrating on fighter-bomber attacks against enemy armoured forces in the tank battles around Knightsbridge. The charismatic Sqn



Ldr Billy Drake of 112 Sqn engaged a Me 109, that was his first victory on the Kittyhawk and would soon see him become the leading RAF pilot on the type. It was a period of constant retreat as Rommel, sensing an opportunity, exploited his initial gains. The rapid eastwards advance saw the fall of Tobruk on 21 June. It had been a period of heavy losses for the DAF squadrons and included Maj John Frost on the 16th. He was the most successful SAAF fighter pilot of the war, though the fighting was by no means one-sided as the 51-victory 'experte', Oltn Otto Schulz was shot down, possibly by 260 Sqn's Sgt Eddie Edwards.

BOTH SIDES EXHAUSTED

The British and Commonwealth forces fell back on the prepared positions around the tiny junction at El Alamein, just 70 miles west of Alexandria. Barely

RIGHT
Kittyhawk III
ET512/KJ-H of No
4 Sqn SAAF after
crash landing with
combat damage at
LG97 on 8 August
1942 with Lt T A
Milne. (AUTHOR'S
COLLECTION)

BELOW
Wg Cdr Barney
Beresford (left)
the 233 Wing
Leader with other
Kittyhawk alumni in
June 1942. (L to R),
Sqn Ldr Billy Drake
(112 Sqn), Flt Lt
Willy Williams (450
Sqn) and Sqn Ldr
'Pedro' Hanbury
(260 Sqn). (J F
EDWARDS)

taking time to rest his exhausted forces, Rommel's offensive to take Egypt began on 1 July. All the DAF Kittyhawk squadrons were fully committed and soon in action, with Flt Sgt Eddie Edwards of 260 Sqn shooting down a Me 109F on the 6th, a feat repeated two days later by 112 Sqn's CO, Billy Drake, who claimed his second flying Kittyhawk in his personal mount, ET790, that wore a '?'

rather than an aircraft letter. That same day 250 Sqn was also in action when Sqn Ldr Mike Judd and Flt Lt Alfred Marshall (who was flying ET916/LD-A) each shot down a Stuka, and the Wing Leader, Wg Cdr Clive Mayers, flying with them in ET836/LD-U, destroyed a 109. This was the final entry in his log book which he annotated: "Leading 4 Sqn over LG21. >>





LEFT
Fg Off John Waddy was a successful Australian pilot who emphasised the international flavour of the DAF Kittyhawk squadrons who flew with British and South African units. (VIA C F SHORES)



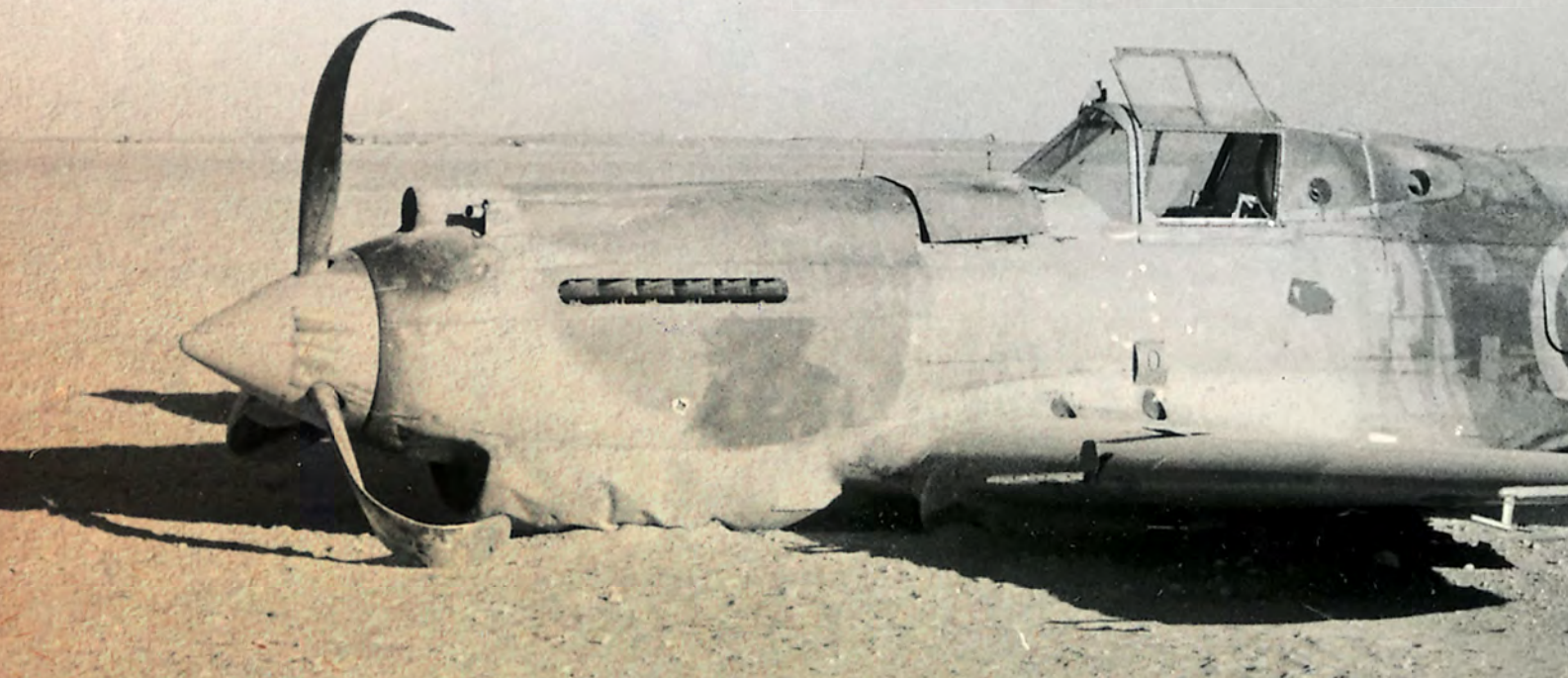
BELOW
Two stalwarts of No 260 Sqn during 1942 were the CO Sqn Ldr 'Pedro' Hanbury seen on the left with the pipe and Flt Lt Ron Cundy. (J F EDWARDS)

Got Me 109F confirmed." He was lost on the 20th and became a PoW.

All Squadrons were increasingly employed on fighter-bomber work, and in spite of the losses were taking a heavy toll on enemy ground forces. The firepower of the Kittyhawks also increased as at this time 450 Sqn's aircraft were modified to carry a 500lb bomb. It then kept hammering at the enemy for the rest of July, flying nearly 500 sorties, claiming a 109 and much motor transport destroyed. By the 19th, after much bitter fighting, the Afrika Korps were down to less than 30 serviceable tanks and ordered to dig in and consolidate. That same day, 260 Sqn's CO, Sqn Ldr 'Pedro' Hanbury, was awarded a bar to his DFC and rested and replaced by Sqn

Ldr P P Devenish, whilst Sqn Ldr David Haysom took over as the leader of No 239 Wg. A British counterattack reversed the Germans slightly, but gained little, and at the end of July, with both sides exhausted, the first Battle of El Alamein ended. A period of relatively settled and uneasy calm began, where each re-equipped and rebuilt ready for the next, and ultimately decisive, round.

The air remained active, with units of both Kittyhawk Wings heavily involved. The jinx on 5 Sqn SAAF remained, however, and on 7 August they lost another CO when five-victory-ace, Maj Dennis





LEFT
Maj 'Rosy' du Toit and his pilots of 4 Sqn SAAF pose in front of his aircraft during October 1942.
(S F DU TOIT)

RIGHT
Flt Lt 'Willy' Williams and his bomb-armed Kittyhawk of 450 Sqn. Helate became a PoW but escaped from Stalag Luft III during the Great Escape of 25 March 1944. On recapture he was murdered by the Gestapo.
(A W J TAYLOR)



BELOW
A few Tomahawks were also used for tactical recce work by 208 Sqn and 40 Sqn SAAF. AK350 belonged to 208 Sqn and came to grief on 17 August.
(VIA C F SHORES)

Lacey, who had recently taken over, led his squadron to provide top cover to Kitty-bombers south west of El Alamein. Over the target heavy ground fire was encountered and his aircraft badly hit. Lacey turned for home and the subsequent events were described by his wingman: "Dennis must have been wounded for he turned for home. When about 20 miles from our LG, and just beginning to relax, they were jumped by two 109s. Dennis went straight in and blew up". The 109s were from III/JG 53, and Lacey probably fell to Gefr Herman Dorman, who then himself fell, probably to Lt Jack in AN461/GL-K, who got in a short burst head on at the leading 109 that blew up. Lacey was the fourth commander of 5 Sqn to have fallen since the start of

the enemy offensive, and in that same action two more Tomahawks were lost.

Rommel's final offensive against the Alamein line began against Alam Halfa on 31 August and resulted in a period of further heavy fighting and substantial losses for the Desert Air Force. The first day of September saw extensive air attacks on the enemy, but at considerable cost with Obltn Hans-Joachim Marseille of 3./JG27 in particular having a field day, so to speak. Allied pilots also made claims, including the now fit Sqn Ldr Bobby Gibbes of 3 Sqn RAAF, who claimed a Me 109 - his first since being injured. Billy Drake of 112 Sqn shot down two Ju 87s, and Capt Danny Saville got another Stuka. No 5 Sqn SAAF's Tomahawks suffered, though, losing four. Also, 4 Sqn SAAF lost their CO in an accident, and so 'Rosie' du Toit was promoted to command; flying ET901/KJ-O. On the 7th he

bagged a 109 destroyed, though his Kittyhawk was damaged. The enemy had suffered heavy losses in their initial push, especially against the defences around Alam Halfa and a British counterattack on the 3rd forced them back, the German withdrawal being completed on the 5th. The losses in the Kittyhawk squadrons had been significant, 260 Sqn's being typical, as Sgt Eddie Edwards recalled: "Many new pilots had arrived on the squadron and intensive training took place. By mid-September 1942 I was leading the squadron on occasions - as just a Sergeant."

TRAILING FIRE AND STREAMS OF SMOKE

The DAF Kittyhawk squadrons truly were Commonwealth affairs - for example, Edwards was a Canadian flying with an RAF unit whilst Capt Danny Saville was a South African >>>



RIGHT
The burned out shell of Kittyhawk III FR265/LD-5 of 250 Sqn bears mute testimony to the fierce fighting after it was shot down by Italian Macchi MC 202s near Fuka on 20 October, resulting in Flt Sgt Roberts becoming a PoW.
(GIOVANNI MASSIMELLO)

CENTRE
Flying Kittyhawk ET790/GA-? on 8 July. Sqn Ldr Billy Drake brought down a Bf 109F near the enemy airfield of El Daba. By then 112 Sqn was flying fighter-bomber missions as is evident from the bomb under the fuselage.
(AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

flight commander in 112 Sqn and Flt Lt John Waddy, an Australian ace, flew with 4 Sqn SAAF. On 20 September, he was flying Kittyhawk EV321/KJ-G on a patrol of Burg el Arab when vectored to intercept an intruder. He later recounted: "Approaching Alamein, bomb bursts were sighted dead ahead. We were at 13,000 feet and went into a shallow dive and sighted enemy aircraft at about 5,000 feet. The leading section attacked and I observed three Me 109s do a right hand climbing turn. I immediately pulled out of the dive and made an almost full beam attack and saw strikes on the engine and cockpit. It then pulled straight up and I followed, making a rear quarter attack after which it stalled and went into a vertical dive and went straight in." This was Waddy's 12th victory (and last on the P-40) and his only confirmed 'kill' whilst with the South African unit.

As the build up to the offensive at Alamein

progressed, so the DAF Kittyhawk squadrons kept hammering at the enemy and their pilots continued to make significant claims. On 1 October elements of 112 and 250 Sqns found a large formation of Ju 87s raiding El Taqa and a number were shot down, the main honours going to Flt Lt Maurice Barber of 250 Sqn who claimed three.

Additionally, heavy rain in early October turned the enemy airfield complex at El Daba into a quagmire as the Kittyhawk squadrons mounted a series of attacks on them to neutralise enemy air power prior to the coming offensive. This was part of the Allied 'preparation of the battlefield' that included continued attacks El Daba airfields complex.



RIGHT
Maj Johnny Human led 2 Sqn SAAF with great success through desperate air during of the period of Alamein, during which he personally claimed four victories. He later led 7 SAAF Wing.
(SAAF VIA M SCHOEMANN)



There, on the 22nd, Eddie Edwards of 260 Sqn, now a Flt Sgt and flying one of the new Kittyhawk II's and having destroyed an MC 202 the previous day, now shot down a Me 109F to claim his fifth victory. He later described the milestone: "We saw two 109s climb, then level off. It was evident that they hadn't seen my four Kittyhawks as top cover. We waited until the two Messerschmitts were about to pass under the nose about 2,000 feet below, and with a quick wingover I started down. The 109s began banking left. At about 150 yards I pressed the trigger then pulled back hard on the stick in a climbing turn to starboard. I could see my victim hit up front in the engine, and along the port wing



ABOVE
Kittyhawk IIA
FL341/CV-E of 3
Sqn RAAF taxis
out with a 500lb
bomb slung
beneath. CV-E was
occasionally flown
by the 239 Wing
Leader, Wg Cdr
'Billy' Burton.
(VIA R BROWN)

deflection shot and hit him. He winged over into a near vertical dive streaming white and black smoke. I followed and broke off."

Two days later, appropriately, it was Sqn Ldr Bobby Gibbes who brought up his Squadron's 200th victory when he shot down a 109F near El Daba. He later recounted: "I saw three 109s flying in line astern. The 109s were about 100 yards apart and I decided to aim at the middle one, so let go about 50 rounds. Immediately the third one in line belched smoke and went into an uncontrollable spin. I was amazed, as I hadn't aimed at it. Later that night we had a terrific celebration party and I confessed that I had aimed for the other one about 100 yards away!" Another Australian who was successful that day was Flt Lt Ron Cundy of 260 Sqn who shot down a Me 109.

During the Battle of El Alamein, the Luftwaffe mounted heavy attacks with formations of Ju 87s, usually at dawn and dusk. One such was on the 1st, when 112 Sqn waded into a formation of Stukas of I and III./StG 3 near the Alamein front line, claiming six destroyed with seven 'probable's which accords with German losses of five with only one crew surviving. It was one of the last great 'Stuka parties.'

Three days later, 260 Sqn welcomed back 'Pedro' Hanbury for another tour in command whilst in another day of heavy fighting Flt Lt Ron Cundy achieved his fifth victory. It was witnessed by Eddie Edwards: "Cundy spotted a Ju 88 flying low in a westerly direction and out to sea. Cundy dived on it, and his section followed. Within minutes he watched it career toward the sea. Cundy's shot had hit the 88 >>



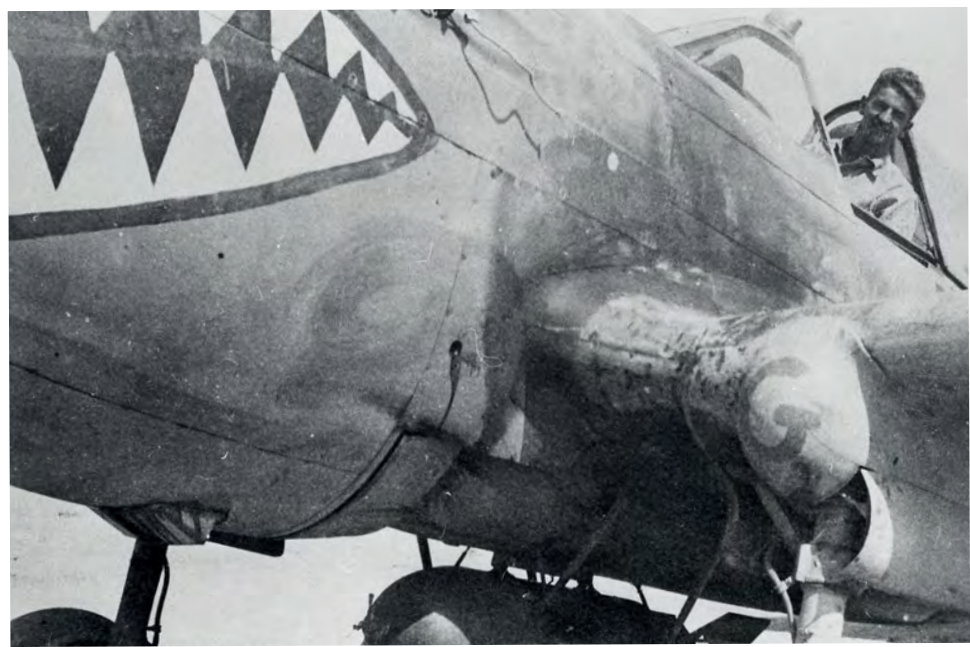
BELOW
Sgt John
MacAuley's
Kittyhawk of 112
Sqn shows the
bomb carrying
shackles on the
centre line station
as he prepares for
another sortie in
October.
(AUTHOR'S
COLLECTION)

root and fuselage, and heading straight toward earth, trailing fire and streams of smoke."

The following evening the bombardment began opening the Battle of El Alamein - and the infantry fixed bayonets...

NEAR VERTICAL DIVE

Under massive air cover to deny the enemy's ability to concentrate forces, the Kittyhawk squadrons flew flat out, hitting enemy encampments and defences. The enemy fighters countered, and there were numerous combats. One, on the 26th, involved Capt Jack Parsonson of 2 Sqn SAAF who was flying EV326/DB-F as top cover for a Boston raid and about 10 enemy fighters broke through to the bombers. He recalled: "One 109F pulled up after his attack and came across my front. I pulled up and fired a full



BELOW
Like over Britain, the Luftwaffe's much vaunted Junkers Ju 87 proved highly vulnerable over the desert. The Kittyhawk squadrons had several memorable 'Stuka parties.' (VIA JOHN WEAL)

in a vital spot. Sprays of water leapt high into the air as it crashed into the sea."

More significantly, 4 November saw Rommel order a general withdrawal and Commonwealth forces beginning their breakout of the Alamein position. The first major significant and decisive Allied victory against the Germans had been won; another soon followed at Stalingrad.

transferred to the SAAF, was flying ET977 30 miles west of Sollum when his section came across some 109s. He dived after one before he sighted a second: "He pulled up in front of me, but I caught him in the climb and had a deflection shot at him as he turned left. He half rolled into a dive and I followed him, firing about three more short bursts. When I thought he couldn't pull out, I pulled up and saw



ABOVE Flt Lt Maurice Barber was a Rhodesian serving with 250 Sqn. He is seen here after a successful engagement where he downed three Ju 87s. He assumed command of 450 Sqn in November 1942. (D CORMACK)



2 and then from the whole formation. While I was by myself I was attacked by a total of eight 109s. The fight took place from 14,000 feet to nought feet and lasted for perhaps 20-30 minutes. A shell pierced my oil tank, both mainplanes were hit and my radio was shot away. I forced-landed and hid behind my propellor boss while a 109 came down and set my aircraft of fire. Then I ran to a circle of stones which was strafed. The 109s circled until a German infantry party came up and took me prisoner." Luckily, Laubscher managed to escape on the 14th and was picked up by a British patrol the following day.

The advance reached Tobruk soon afterwards, and the Kittyhawk squadrons moved forward to Gazala on the 17th.

This time, there was no going back. ☹

RACE ACROSS THE DESERT

BELOW
A trio of Kittyhawks line up for take off from a desert strip, such facilities were often no more than a patch of desert marked by oil drums and a few tents. (H W. STRIKE COMMAND)

As 8th Army began a general advance westward, bad weather hampered the Allies, as did many spirited enemy rearguard actions. The DAF squadrons also began to move forward in support and continued to encounter enemy fighters, such as when 2 Sqn SAAF covered 260 Sqn on a sweep to Tobruk on 10 November, with varying results. Charles Laubscher, having now

him hit the ground." His victim was Ltn Konrad Fels of I/JG 77. However, Capt Jack Parsonson did not return but his subsequent report gave the details: "South of Sollum we were attacked by ME 109s and 260 Sqn were engaged and so Red and then Yellow sections of my squadron dived down to engage followed by two aircraft from my section, leaving me and No 2 on top. Four 109s are in the air near us, two attacked. I got separated from my No

